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Liberalism in Indonesia: Between Authoritarian Statism and Islamism

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ABSTRACT

It is hardly surprising that liberalism has been neglected in studies of Indonesian political thought, with most scholars focusing on nationalism, communism, conservatism, populism, and Islamism. The term 'liberal' has long been a byword for the kind of naked individualism and dog-eat-dog capitalism against which mainstream Indonesian nationalism has contrasted itself. This article argues that liberalism has, nevertheless, been present as a counter-narrative throughout Indonesia's modern history and should be considered as a distinct political tradition. Liberal ideas inform Indonesia's legal, economic, and political structures and have thrived in sections of the media, the professions, academia, and civil society organisations, reaching their apogee in the unique circumstances of the immediate post-Soeharto period. Repeated efforts to establish overtly liberal political vehicles, though, have gained little traction in a political environment dominated by nationalist and Islamist parties. This article argues that despite the rapid growth of the economy, Indonesia's middle classes are still relatively weak and dependent, and have repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to ally with authoritarian statism when their interests are threatened by populist movements from the left or the right.

KEYWORDS

Liberalism; ideology; Indonesia; politics; political thought; liberal Islam

Despite serious erosion of rights and liberties over the past decade, Indonesia's transition away from authoritarianism is remarkable, not only in the Southeast Asian context but within the Islamic world as well (Aspinall, 2015). After the fall of Soeharto in 1998, sweeping constitutional reforms guaranteed a raft of political and human rights based on the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Why, then, do studies of ideology in Indonesia focus on conservatism, nationalism, communism, Islamism, and populism, and so rarely on liberalism?

Clearly the historically weak and dependent character of Indonesia's middle class has limited the constituency for liberal ideas, but there are also ideological factors at play that set Indonesia apart from some of the other cases covered in this Special Issue. The word '*liberalisme*' has long carried negative connotations in Indonesia. No political party has ever called itself liberal and very few individuals have represented themselves as champions of liberalism, at least in the political context. In the public sphere, liberalism is often

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a byword for the kind of naked individualism that Indonesian national culture has historically been defined against.

Yet if we look at the sweep of modern Indonesian history, it is possible to speak of a liberal tradition. Some of the most influential figures in Indonesia's nationalist movement, including Hatta, Natsir, Sjahrir, Sultan Hamengku Buwono, Wilopo, Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, and Colonel Simatupang had, in the words of Herbert Feith (1962, 45),

> drunk deeply of the traditions of European liberalism and socialism or drawn similar values from a modernist Islam . . . [They] believed public liberties and the rule of law to be of great importance, and many of them saw parliamentary institutions as necessary safeguards against a possible development of authoritarianism, fascism, or demagogic rule.

Between the proclamation of independence in 1945 and 1957, a period in which formal politics was conducted within a liberal democratic political framework, these figures played a central role. The demolition of the liberal democratic system in 1957 in favour of Sukarno's populist authoritarianism and then Soeharto's repressive developmentalism for the next four decades did not mean that liberal values disappeared. Viewing Indonesia through a liberal lens it is possible to discern a stream of individuals and movements, including allies of Soeharto, that have spoken up in favour of liberal values. One measure of the persistence and tenacity of this stream is the effort that successive authoritarian regimes have put into counteracting it. Propaganda efforts under both Sukarno and Soeharto consistently identified liberalism as a threat, and both presidents invested considerable resources in constructing a national identity in opposition to it. Another indicator of the resilience of liberal ideals is the striking consensus that existed in the ranks of the *reformasi* movement about the need for sweeping constitutional reforms to constrain state power in Soeharto's wake.

We seek to demonstrate that while liberal norms have long been part of Indonesian legal and political structures, and have thrived in the press, pressure groups, and many other civil society organisations, the constituency for liberal ideas has never extended beyond a relatively small, urban, educated elite with little basis outside Indonesia's largest cities. Liberals themselves have therefore had limited political choices when they have had to defend their interests. Their poor ability to organise (Liddle, 1973), their failure to historicise themselves to foster legitimacy (Fakih, 2015) and, thus, their frequent reliance on stronger allies (including authoritarian state and other illiberal actors) have often made it difficult to distinguish their positions from those of their more organised and powerful patrons.

In surveying liberalism in Indonesia, this article is a response to Michael Freeden's (1978, 246) challenge to discover political thought 'at any level of political action, on different levels of sophistication'. It engages with liberalism not as a product of isolated scholastic exercise (the 'Great Thinkers' approach) but as a collection of discourses emerging from debates among intellectuals, reformers, statesmen, and pressure groups (Freeden, 2015, 17). Research in this vein has uncovered varieties of liberalism across cultures and regions (see, e.g., Claudio, 2017; Janowski, 2004; Rabow-Edling, 2018; Valdameri, 2015). Several contemporary accounts have also done critical work distilling recurring themes and concepts from the diverse manifestations of liberalism (Fawcett, 2014; Freeden, 2015; Rosenblatt, 2018). Freeden's identification of liberalism (2015, 13), for example, as an ideology broadly defined by seven interrelated political concepts

('liberty, rationality, individuality, progress, sociability, the general interest, and limited and accountable power') is particularly instructive as it allows us to proceed from prior attempts to discuss liberalism in local contexts.

In the Indonesian context Daniel Lev (1978) refers to liberals' 'ideological tendency to favour private rights and interests' and their demands for 'institutional limits and controls over government authority'. So, while Indonesian liberalism incorporates traditional liberal concerns for rights and freedoms and the protection of minorities, it has a strong accent on constitutionalism, or what Lev (1978) called a struggle for an Indonesian *Rechtsstaat* (state governed by laws). In this sense Indonesian liberals can be characterised as primarily concerned with what Isaiah Berlin (1969) called 'negative liberty'. A second notable feature of liberalism in the Indonesian context is that it is not secular, setting it outside the tradition started by Milton and J. S. Mill. Indonesian liberals are closer in this respect to John Rawls, whose vision of political liberalism allowed 'comprehensive doctrines' including religions, but only to the extent that they were 'reasonable' and did not attempt to use political power to impose their views on others (Fish, 2007). Third, few of those who could be described as liberals have a view of society that is fundamentally adversarial, a feature that some view as a defining characteristic of liberalism (Fawcett, 2014, 10, in Larsson, 2017, 533). Until very recently, for instance, there has been little public advocacy for the position that good government requires a vigorous opposition or even substantive debate. Last, Indonesian liberals tend not to identify as such.

This article sketches the history of liberalism in Indonesia from before independence to the present, highlighting certain ideological entrepreneurs and the movements with which they were identified. The political context in which they operated will also be noted, as this shaped their arguments and determined their success (or more commonly, failure). The political context also helps explain the lack of a *self-conscious* liberal tradition in Indonesia. Successive governments have actively tried to discredit past manifestations of liberalism as culturally incompatible and to erase them from national history.

The article highlights some paradoxes that will be familiar to observers of politics in Southeast Asia. With some notable exceptions, Indonesian liberals have demonstrated, for instance, a remarkable ability to ignore the sufferings of their communist enemies massacred or interned without trial in 1965–1967.[1] Intolerance for Marxism, and for that matter, atheism, continues today. Liberals have also shown themselves willing to tolerate some quite severe restrictions on civil and political freedoms, both in the New Order period and under subsequent administrations.

A comprehensive treatment of liberalism in Indonesia would encompass both political and economic liberalism, but the focus here is the political aspect. The article does, however, touch on three recent attempts to promote liberalism in the contexts of religion (the Liberal Islam Network), economics (the Freedom Institute), and politics (the Indonesian Solidarity Party).

A Dirty Word

Why is 'liberal' a dirty word in Indonesia? The answer lies in the history of Indonesian nationalism. When national consciousness was emerging in the Netherlands Indies in the

1920s and 1930s, leftist ideas were much more attractive to the young nationalists than liberal ones. This was true across the entire political spectrum, including Islamic nationalists. The word 'liberal' was strongly associated in nationalist discourse with 19th-century laissez-faire liberalism that afforded maximum freedom to business without regard for the welfare of the population. Indonesia experienced the full force of deregulated capitalism during the so-called 'liberal period' of Dutch colonial policy between 1870 and 1901. During this period, land laws were liberalised and private investment poured into the Indies. There was a rapid expansion of plantations growing cash crops such as sugar, coffee, tea, and rubber, often relying on compulsory labour. This generated huge profits for Dutch business, but also widespread social disruption and exploitation due to slave-like working conditions, especially in densely populated areas of Java.

Reports on the cruelty and exploitative work practices of Dutch business that took place under the rubric of the 'liberal system' increased domestic political pressure on the government in The Hague to acknowledge its 'debt of honour' to the native Indonesians. In 1901, the Dutch Queen announced the introduction of the 'Ethical Policy' which was intended to plough back some of the profits from Dutch business into improving the welfare of Indonesians through education and agricultural projects.

The main beneficiaries of Dutch education were the sons and daughters of the Indonesian administrative elite. Even though these numbered no more than a few thousand, they gained a high-quality education that enabled them to read Dutch, English, French, and German. This exposed them to the intellectual currents in Europe either through books and newspapers or through direct experience for the lucky few who studied at universities in Europe. It was among this group of Indonesians that nationalism first took root.

One particularly persuasive idea that was embraced across the nationalist spectrum was Lenin's theory of imperialism that held liberal capitalism directly responsible for imperialism and colonialism (Willoughby, 1995). It became an enduring article of faith that liberalism was bound to capitalism and colonialism. Most nationalists argued that what was needed was 'cohesion, integration, and solidarity – not "individualism" but "collectivism", not "liberalism" but "socialism"' (Feith, 1962, 35). So even among the most 'Westernised' elements of the Indonesian nationalist movement, liberalism was associated, at least rhetorically, with dog-eat-dog capitalism and remained so in the lexicon of Indonesian politics for at least the next half century.

Lineages

The Netherlands was ruled by a liberal government for the second half of the 19th century but had little interest in transplanting the growing liberal reforms at home to the colonies. There were rare individuals, however, such as the Indo–European journalist and political activist Douwes Dekker, whose 1860 novel *Max Havelaar* not only helped to awaken the conscience of the Dutch public to the injustices being perpetrated in their name but also fed into nationalist critiques of the colonial system and its local accomplices. One of his readers was Raden Ajeng Kartini, the Dutch educated daughter of a Javanese aristocrat who became an early champion of liberal values in Indonesia. Kartini struck up a friendship with the wife of a colonial government minister, and the publication in 1911 of the remarkable correspondence between them made her

a household name. Feted as Indonesia's first feminist, Kartini criticised the poor treatment of women in traditional Javanese culture and was a strong advocate for education and the right of women to determine their own future. Sociologist Barbara Celarent argues that Kartini was a 'true liberal' not only for her contributions to larger battles but because of her sensibility and sense of personal autonomy (2015, 1015).

Liberal values influenced several early nationalists and nationalist organisations that advocated representation, education, and equality for the indigenous population, but on the political front the goal of national liberation took priority over the championing of the protection of individual rights and liberties. In the cultural sphere, a group of Sumatran writers in the 1930s stand out as powerful voices for what they regarded as universal values of rationality and individual freedom. Led by the lawyer Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, the group formed a literary magazine called *Pudjangga Baru* that condemned the tendency for most nationalists at the time to romanticise Indonesian culture and to look to past glories for inspiration. Alisjahbana sought instead to build a national culture in Indonesia based on the best the modern world had to offer, including concepts of 'social humanism, of the rights and dignity of individuals and nation states, Marxism, democratic political theory, and the idea of progress' (Sutherland, 1968, 115).

It was *Pudjangga Baru* contributor Sutan Sjahrir, however, who would establish himself as the most articulate and significant defender of liberal values between the war and his death in exile in 1966. Sjahrir was a prominent activist among the Indonesian student community in the Netherlands and helped found the Indonesian National Party in 1931 before being arrested by the Dutch, along with Mohammad Hatta, in 1934. His uncompromising anti-fascism saw him excluded from any position of authority during the Japanese occupation, but in the wake of Japan's defeat became a valuable asset, facilitating his rise to become Indonesia's first prime minister in 1945.

The Japanese occupation was a dark period for liberal ideals given the heavy censorship and the constant anti-allied propaganda of the military administration. Conservative and nativist thinking was encouraged, and when the Japanese decided to appoint a committee to draft a constitution in mid-1945, its members were advised to look to local traditions for inspiration. In a famous speech, the lead drafter and Indonesia's foremost expert in customary law, Raden Supomo, rejected the liberal philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau on the grounds that they reflected the individualistic culture of Europe. He argued instead for 'integralism', an ultra-conservative philosophy purportedly based on traditional village organisation in which there was no separation between state and society and therefore no need for political rights (Supomo, 1970).

Supomo's proposals met with stiff resistance from several other delegates who argued that they would pave the way for a dictatorship. Foremost among them were the economist Hatta and the lawyer Mohammad Yamin. Yamin, who was well versed in US constitutional politics, pressed for the inclusion of political rights and the separation of powers, while the social democrat Hatta also stressed the importance of rights and the need for the state to act to protect the weak. Even though the constitution they produced gave the president vast power, it contained brief provisions on the right to free speech, free organisation, independence of the judiciary, and the existence of a parliament.

The 1945 constitutional debates were actually a three-way battle between social democratic, conservative nationalist, and Islamist elements. In response to Islamist delegates' arguments that it should be obligatory for Muslims to follow Islamic law, the

charismatic nationalist leader Sukarno laid out five principles (Pancasila) to serve as the nation's ideology: belief in one God, humanitarianism, national unity, deliberative consensus, and social justice. Due in part to the generic wording of the first principle, Pancasila has come to be viewed as a historic compromise that has helped guarantee a degree of protection for minorities.

The allied victory in August 1945 saw power slip away from Sukarno to a small group of social democrats led by Sjahrir, who shelved the authoritarian constitution and authorised the formation of political parties and a provisional parliament. One of the most liberal figures in Indonesian political history, Sjahrir's democratic credentials were cemented, both abroad and at home, by the 1945 publication of his pamphlet *Our Struggle* in which Sjahrir laid out his vision of a humanistic nationalism that balanced a demand for national liberation with respect for individual and minority rights (Bijl, 2017, 261). He was particularly concerned to curtail hatred and revolutionary violence against 'foreigners, Europeans, and Asians of mixed descent, Christians, Ambonese, Menadonese, and so forth' (Sjahrir, 1968, 31–32). Anderson (1968, 12) observed that Sjahrir's forceful critique of authoritarianism, his demands for a liberal constitution and human rights, were at once aimed at placating the West while at the same time directed at 'liberalizing Indonesian society from the … bondage of colonialism and "tradition"'.

With the republic facing scarcity, there was an accommodation to market capitalism, not only by Sjahrir's Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI) but also by the Muslim Masjumi and the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI). While all advocated varieties of socialism, their formulations of socialism were vague, and reflected the interests of their social bases (Vu, 2010, 228–229). Masjumi, supported by petty bourgeois Muslim traders, for example, advocated a kind of religious socialism based on Islamic teaching that emphasised *zakat* (alms) as a method of wealth redistribution while permitting 'wealth accumulation only within certain limits set by the "principle of humanity"'. Sukarno's PNI, a party dominated by *priyayi* (Javanese gentry), employed the term *marhaen* to refer to the common people stretching from peasants and manual workers to government employees. PSI, originally a Marxist party consisting of urban middle-class intellectuals, stressed the need for industrialisation through foreign investment as part of the transition to a democratic socialist society. During the revolution all political parties emphasised central planning and economic nationalism as opposed to what they viewed as 'free-fight liberalism', but this substantially changed in later years. By the mid-1950s, PSI, Masjumi, and the left wing of the PNI had gradually moved from economic nationalism to championing 'foreign and Chinese capital as the main generating force of capitalist development' (Robison, 1986, 62).

What these groups had in common was their defence of private property and opposition to key conceptual elements of communism, including the dictatorship of the proletariat and class struggle, which they perceived as authoritarian (Vu, 2010, 228–229).[2] It is noteworthy that, by 1952, PSI had purged references to class struggle from its platform and recognised Marxism 'as a guide but not as dogma' (Fogg, 2021, 470).[3] Central to Sjahrir's writings in the 1950s is the revisionist idea that capitalism could be reformed from within, following examples from post-war Europe (Sjahrir, 1982). In short, 'socialism' was widely accepted as long as it did not disrupt the newly gained privileges of petty bourgeois nationalist elites.[4]

Given the country's subsequent history of inward-looking authoritarianism, it may seem puzzling that, when Indonesia achieved full independence in 1949, it adopted a liberal constitution. Feith has argued that it made sense given the imperative to impress the Americans and the Dutch that Indonesia could govern itself according to modern democratic norms. He also pointed out that the political leadership at the time, including most prominently Sjahrir, Hatta, and Islamic scholar Mohammad Natsir, had been operating within a parliamentary system since 1945 and had an interest in seeing it continue (Feith, 1962, 45).

The interim constitution of 1950 laid the foundation of a parliamentary democracy, with a panoply of checks and balances as well as guarantees of civil and political rights based on the newly minted Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For the next seven years, political parties, including the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), competed peacefully. Cabinets rose and fell at a rate of about one a year, but constitutional norms were generally adhered to. The first national elections were held in 1955, leading to the formation of a Constituent Assembly with the task of drafting a permanent constitution.

What is striking about the constitutional debates in the mid-1950s is the widespread support among the elected party representatives for liberal democratic norms. Buyung Nasution's detailed study of the debates, based on the long-suppressed minutes of the proceedings, revealed almost unanimous agreement on the need for comprehensive guarantees of political and human rights, including detailed provisions protecting individuals from mistreatment by authorities (Nasution, 1992, 139). Numerous speakers referenced Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Jefferson to support their cause.

The parliamentary democracy years are a high point in the history of political liberalism in Indonesia but are little known to subsequent generations of liberals because they were so successfully written out of the national story. For decades, official histories and schoolbooks glossed over the liberal period as an unstable time when Indonesia lost its way (Bourchier, 1994).

In 1959, Sukarno and the military dealt a death blow to parliamentary democracy, resurrecting the 1945 Constitution and ushering in an era of populist authoritarianism known as Guided Democracy. Sukarno popularised a narrative in which the country's problems were blamed squarely on its misguided embrace of a liberal system of government out of tune with Indonesia's communalistic character and indeed with the exigencies of the modern welfare state (Fakih, 2020, 163). Virtually all vestiges of liberalism were swept away: freedom of speech, elections, elected parliaments, the independence of the judiciary, and limits on state power.

Liberal voices did not disappear completely during the Sukarno era. Politicians associated with the PSI and the modernist Islamic party Masjumi continued to criticise Sukarno's authoritarianism until both parties were banned and Sjahrir was arrested in 1960. Liberal-minded intellectuals continued to occupy niches in universities and the arts. The economics faculty at the University of Indonesia, for instance, was extensively staffed with Ford Foundation-funded graduates advocating free-market economics (Parmar, 2012, 139), while outspoken liberal writer and journalist Mochtar Lubis became internationally famous as a critic of Sukarno and communism until his arrest in 1961 (Hill, 2010). Growing communist influence also prompted a group of liberal writers including Goenawan Mohamad and Wiratmo Soekito to issue a 'Cultural Manifesto' in

1963 defending the freedom of artists to 'struggle to improve the human condition', but they were very much on the margins (Jones, 2007).

As the prospect of a communist takeover became more real in the years 1963–1965, anti-communist forces were drawn together. These included right-wing military officers, Muslim parties, Christian parties, professionals, students, academics, business owners, rural landowners, and large swathes of the urban middle classes, liberal or otherwise. It was this coalition that got behind Major-General Soeharto when he effectively seized power in October 1965.

One of the most arresting aspects of this story is the enthusiasm of students and their educated middle-class supporters, whose professed belief in freedom of speech and rule of law would identify them as liberals, for the military's large-scale massacre of suspected communists. Around half a million communists were rounded up and killed, and tens of thousands more were imprisoned without trial for more than a decade. This is by no means the only case of middle-class liberals acting as 'contingent democrats', siding with authoritarians when their interests are threatened (Bellin, 2000). Liberal elements have behaved in similar ways in times of crisis not only in Asia and Africa, but in Europe as well. As Mazower (1999) pointed out, few European liberals came to the defence of democracy as populist right-wing or fascist governments spread across the continent in the interwar years.

Liberals as Modernisers

With the integration of Indonesia into the Western bloc, Cold War liberalism and modernisation theory played a major role in shaping the views of liberals in the 1960s. Modernisation theory had once envisioned a seamless transformation of the world towards US-style liberal democracy, but the growing threat of communism led social scientists aligned with Washington to prescribe modernisation from above, with a leading role for the state in imposing political order and implementing development projects to redress inequality. A coalition of what Liddle (1973, 179) called 'secular modernising intellectuals', many of whom had links to the PSI, joined the ranks of Soeharto's New Order regime to bring about what they conceived of as social, legal, political, and economic modernisation. Political modernisation, in their view, meant building a two-party system in which political parties would compete on the basis of rational programmes rather than ideology and primordial loyalties (Bourchier & Hadiz, 2003, 56–81). Restoring the rule of law and a system of checks and balances was a key part of this vision, and many liberals were mollified by the Soeharto regime's constitutionalist rhetoric in its initial phase. Law, after all, was conceived as an 'instrument of a modernizing state' in which 'lawyers and judges were seen as social engineers, who would cultivate the legal norms and changes in the formal system of law needed to promote progressive political and economic development' (Trubek, 2001, 8443).

This optimism persisted for some years as non-communist political parties that had survived the Sukarno era were allowed to operate and leeway was given to some critical media and student critics of the regime. By the early 1970s, though, it was clear that Soeharto had no tolerance for opposition or checks on his power. Critical newspapers were closed, parties banned, and independent organisations brought mostly under the control of the state. While the trappings of democracy, including 'opposition' parties,

parliaments, and elections, were preserved, power was concentrated in the hands of the presidency, the military, and the state party, Golkar. On the ideological front the New Order presented itself as at once modernising and nativist, with developmentalist rhetoric blending with appeals to authentic tradition, embodied by its own hierarchical and static version of Pancasila. Liberalism, in Soeharto's view, was simply another 'imported ideology' that caused suffering and division (Bourchier, 2015, 200).

Ruth McVey (1994, 13) observed that, for much of the Soeharto period, the dialogue between liberal critics and the state had a 'David-vs-Goliath appearance' because it took place in an arena that had been 'cleared of other participants'. Liberals retained a precarious foothold in some universities and publishing houses such as *Sinar Harapan, Tempo*, and *Gramedia*, and found an outlet in NGO activity focused on issues including the plight of the urban and rural poor, the environment, women, and human rights. Many were funded by agencies including the Ford Foundation, Asia Foundation, National Endowment for Democracy, and the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, underlining the significance of global networks in helping sustain liberal institutions operating in illiberal environments.

One of the most important NGOs and sites for liberal activism was the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (LBH), founded by Nasution, an attorney from a PSI background and an early supporter of the New Order. As well as providing free representation to the poor in high profile cases, LBH took advantage of its status to campaign openly for constitutionalism and human rights. In the absence of mass politics, LBH came to play a vital role in creating a culture of dissidence in which the struggle for a *Rechtsstaat* became a primary focus. It popularised, in other words, the notion that the state had to be limited by law and that human rights were in everyone's interest, regardless of ideology. This supports the observation that 'metropolitan organisations with a liberal political agenda may actually provide a form of political "shelter" for other ideological positions that would be impossible to advance independently' (Bajpai & Bonura, 2013, 664–665; see also Hewison, 1999).

By the 1980s the rigid political architecture built by Soeharto and the military to enforce political stability and rapid economic development could no longer accommodate an increasingly confident, outspoken, and globally connected middle class. The communist threat that the New Order had used to justify its political restrictions had long since disappeared, and the ending of the Cold War only increased domestic and international pressure for Indonesia to liberalise its political system. Soeharto responded by loosening the political screws in 1990/91, which saw an upsurge of civil society activism and calls from prominent individuals formerly part of the state apparatus for a return to 'normal' democracy (e.g., Sumitro, 1989). Some of the increased activism was quietly supported by sections of the military frustrated by Soeharto's corruption and misrule.

Springtime for Liberals

B. J. Habibie's elevation to the presidency in the wake of Soeharto's forced resignation in May 1998 led to a period of rapid liberalisation. A long-time cabinet minister and engineer, Habibie became an accidental hero of democracy as he acquiesced to multiple demands for change from the student-led *reformasi* movement. Within days, new political parties began to form and the press sprang to life, breaking longstanding taboos.

Students demanded a complete democratic overhaul of the political system, including an immediate end to military involvement in politics. Latecomers to the reform movement, including the leaders of political parties and social and religious organisations with a history of cooperation with the New Order, embraced the agenda of multiparty democracy with surprising alacrity. It is remarkable that after decades of rhetoric about the lack of fit between Indonesian culture and 'Western-style' democracy, some version of multiparty democracy appeared the natural choice to accommodate the demands of the numerous political interests jostling for power.

The outcome of the popular mobilisation in Indonesia was of course constrained by the political, economic, and ideological context. Communism remained outlawed. Soeharto escaped prosecution and the oligarchic structure of Indonesian capitalism persisted. But the changes were nevertheless extraordinary. In a frenzy of legislation over the ensuing four years, the parliament passed laws to decentralise political power, dismantle Pancasila indoctrination, and remove the military from formal politics, as well as amending the Constitution to democratise representative bodies, set up a powerful Constitutional Court, limit presidential terms, initiate direct elections for the president and all legislatures, and introduce a comprehensive array of civil and political rights. While the process of constitutional reform was ad hoc, the amendments adhered consistently to the liberal principle that a regime of checks and balances was necessary to guarantee accountability and citizens' rights.

Any explanation of why the Habibie government, and the administration of Abdurrahman Wahid that followed it, embraced sweeping liberalisation needs to take into account, first, that in the absence of mass parties, dissent against the Soeharto regime was led by student activists, NGOs, and intellectuals; second, that thanks in part to the limited political space they were afforded, these activists had long adopted the language of democracy, human rights, and constitutionalism; third, that there was a desire on the part of the cosmopolitan elite to rehabilitate Indonesia's reputation internationally after years of criticism from human rights bodies, the United Nations, and governments, including that of the US; and fourth, that Soeharto's regime was highly personalistic, and that its internal logic crumbled with his resignation. Horowitz's (2013) characterisation of the liberal reforms as an 'inside job' is not far from the mark, with the conditions for the transition a product of the exclusionary nature of politics under the New Order.

Leadership was also crucial. Even though Habibie had served Soeharto faithfully as a minister for many years, he revealed himself to be surprisingly open to liberal values, even if it was for partly pragmatic reasons. Dewi Fortuna Anwar, one of Habibie's closest advisors wrote:

> Habibie did not seem to have any discomfort with 'western values' and once he became president immediately embraced the concepts of democracy and human rights as universal values … As a scientist Habibie could also see that the majority of developed countries are those that have adopted democratic systems of government which allow their citizens freedom of thought and expression (Anwar, 2010, 100).

Abdurrahman too had maintained a high profile throughout the New Order, managing to play the role of moderate critic while keeping the massive Islamic organisation Nahdlatul Ulama that formed his primary constituency out of trouble by disengaging it from formal politics. Brought up within the syncretic-traditionalist stream of Islam and

with a deep interest in the US liberal tradition, Abdurrahman had a long and well-grounded commitment to liberal beliefs, in the spheres of both religion and politics. As president, he was inept, alienating virtually all his political allies as well as the military leadership, leading to his impeachment in 2001. Abdurrahman is rightly credited, however, with restoring the right of the Indonesian Chinese minority to celebrate their culture and take an active part in politics. He was also responsible for encouraging religious liberals to be more assertive in resisting the growing influence of Islamic conservatives in both politics and society.

Insurgent Liberalism: Islam, Economics, and Politics

One of the most audacious attempts to carve out a space for liberalism in Indonesia after the collapse of the New Order was the formation of the Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal, JIL) in 2001 by a group of young Islamic scholars led by Ulil Abshar Abdalla. The intellectual roots of the group go back to the Muslim pluralist thinkers in the 1970s such as Achmad Wahib, Dawam Rahardjo, Mukti Ali, and Nurcholish Madjid. Madjid, who had earned a PhD at the University of Chicago under the supervision of reformist philosopher Fazlur Rahman, developed what came to be known in the Indonesian context as neo-modernism, an interpretation of Islam that embraced tolerance, democracy, and pluralism. This movement gained a significant following among the middle classes and was allowed considerable latitude by Soeharto because it eschewed political involvement and argued that there was no inherent conflict between Islam and Pancasila.

Prompted in part by Charles Kurtzman's 1998 book *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, which brought together writings by liberal Muslims from around the world, Ulil and other scholars including Luthfi Assyaukanie and Budi Munawar Rahman, as well as liberal cultural figures associated with the Utan Kayu enclave in Jakarta, decided to launch JIL to share ideas, publish books, and propagate the idea that Islam was compatible with pluralism, the secular state, and the market economy. In their reading, the Quran could be interpreted in a way that would support liberal norms, including a ban on polygamy, an end to discrimination against women, and interreligious marriage.

These ideas infuriated conservative scholars who regarded JIL as heretical. One *fatwa* issued by the ultra-conservative Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) declared Ulil's blood to be *halal* (legitimately shed) (Ichwan, 2013, 81). MUI's landmark *fatwa* in 2005 condemning 'liberalism, secularism, and pluralism' as 'against Islamic teachings' was in part directed at JIL, and soon afterwards triggered an attack on the organisation's headquarters by the hard-line vigilante group Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) (Olle, 2009, 102).

While JIL garnered a lot of media and scholarly attention for a few years, it failed to attract a substantial following, and by 2015 had all but disappeared. It did, however, serve to highlight the existence of an authentic liberal tradition within Indonesian Islam dating back to the 1970s. Indeed, one of the claims of moderate Muslim organisations including Nahdlatul Ulama is that Islam in Indonesia has been syncretic and tolerant from its very beginnings. This, indeed, is the premise behind the notion of *Islam Nusantara* ('Archipelagic Islam') promoted by the Joko Widodo government to curb Islamist influence domestically and dissociate Indonesia internationally from the stereotypes that have grown up around Middle Eastern Islam.

Growing out of the same Jakarta milieu as JIL, and involving some of the same figures, was the Freedom Institute, a think tank founded to promote liberal democracy and free market policies. Whereas JIL was seen as representing a self-conscious liberal force in Indonesian Islam, the Freedom Institute advocated neoclassical economic doctrines that were considered taboo even by mainstream Indonesian liberals as a central aspect of liberalism. Founded in 2002 by politics scholar Rizal Mallarangeng, the Freedom Institute regularly organised public discussions and seminars frequented by urban middle-class intellectuals and professionals, and published some of the key works by classical liberals and free market libertarians such as Friedrich A. Hayek, Leopold von Mises, and Frederic Bastiat. In its mission to build a new liberal epistemic community, the Freedom Institute worked with the Institute of Economic Affairs and Atlas Network, British and American NGOs that promote free market policies. Mallarangeng was enthusiastic about the prospect of encouraging a new intellectual tradition associated with the economic right. In Mallarangeng's words, the Indonesian intellectual tradition has always been 'painted in different shades of the left'. It was always seen as 'suspicious of business', viewing 'free trade as detrimental to the interests of the disempowered' (Ford Foundation, 2003, 197). In a provocative 1996 essay titled *Liberalism Belongs to the Left, Socialism to the Right*, Mallarangeng had argued that early New Order technocrats such as Widjojo Nitisastro were more progressive than self-proclaimed leftist groups such as the People's Democratic Party (PRD) because of their willingness to challenge the statist orthodoxies behind Indonesian economic thinking (Mallarangeng, 2008). At the same time, Freedom Institute intellectuals, like their counterparts in the Philippines and Malaysia, have taken pains to argue for the compatibility of liberalism with nationalist concepts, including *gotong royong* (mutual aid), Sukarno's *kemajemukan* (diversity), and the principles of humanity, democracy, unity, and tolerance embodied by Pancasila (Allés, 2012, 73, 77).

The irony is that the largest sponsor of the Freedom Institute was the oligarch Aburizal Bakrie, who can hardly be considered a liberal in either the political or economic sense. A major donor to SBY's 2004 presidential campaign, Bakrie sought and received protection from the SBY administration when residents of the East Javanese town of Sidoardjo demanded compensation from the Bakrie-owned Lapindo company after it triggered a devastating mud volcano. Embroiled in accusations of corruption and tax fraud, Bakrie as chair of the Golkar Party later succeeded in forcing the resignation of liberal reformer and anti-corruption figure Sri Mulyani from her position as finance minister.

By the time SBY was elected to succeed Megawati Sukarnoputri as president in 2004, a surge of ethnonationalist violence in several provinces had helped sway the mood away from liberalism towards a more inward-looking brand of nationalism that saw the re-emergence of nativist rhetoric reminiscent of the Soeharto regime.

With many freedoms and rights now guaranteed by the Constitution, the struggle of liberals during the presidency of SBY was less with the government than with conservative groups in society. An important consequence of the post-Soeharto democratic reforms was the formation of numerous Islamic political parties and activist groups; some of these were accommodationist but others were openly intolerant of or hostile to non-Muslims. SBY's reliance on conservative Islamic political parties to support his coalition saw religious intolerance increasingly enter the political mainstream. There was also a marked increase in attacks on minorities accused of insulting Islam, either

through their statements or simply for existing, as was the case for the Ahmadiyah minority.

Liberals found themselves once again on the defensive in 2006, this time in response to a government bill ostensibly aimed at combatting pornography and 'pornographic activities'. Proposed by conservative Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and United Development Party (PPP), the original draft prescribed harsh penalties for a range of behaviours including 'displaying sensual body parts' and 'engaging in activities leading to sexual relations with persons of the same sex' (Pausacker, 2008). In this case, liberal protesters were joined by representatives of indigenous people from Eastern Indonesia and nationalist parliamentarians who argued that the law would criminalise traditional dances and costumes. Indonesian LGBT advocacy groups including Dede Oetomo's pioneering Gaya Nusantara and Arus Pelangi were also active in these protests. They succeeded in diluting the bill, but the version passed in 2008 nevertheless introduced significant new restrictions on individual freedoms and has encouraged groups including the FPI to conduct raids of premises thought to be sponsoring immoral activities (Pausacker, 2008).

Keen to preserve minority rights, a liberal-minded group led by Abdurrahman Wahid and the Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation launched a case in the Constitutional Court challenging the legality of a law prohibiting blasphemy. The plaintiffs argued that the law contravened the freedom of religion guaranteed by the 1945 Constitution and exposed religious minorities to persecution (Abdi, 2014, 62–64). In a historic decision, the Constitutional Court rejected the challenge, arguing for the first time that because Pancasila stipulated 'Belief in One God' it followed that Indonesia was a theistic state with an obligation to uphold belief in God and to regulate religious practice. The ruling also obliged the state to compel adherence to religion, paving the way for the legal persecution of atheists (Amnesty International, 2014).

Urban liberals were prominent in the campaign that brought the current president, Joko Widodo (Jokowi) to power in 2014. Jokowi was seen as representing a new generation of Indonesians who were educated, globally connected, and ideologically pluralist. He was well-known for his successful governorship of Jakarta in partnership with the Chinese Christian politician Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok). Ahok took over the reins in Jakarta when Jokowi became president and campaigned to win the governorship in his own right in 2017. During the campaign Ahok was accused of criticising the Quran, leading to the largest demonstrations in Indonesia's history, with a coalition of Islamist groups demanding his arrest for blasphemy. Overwhelmed by the turnout, Jokowi capitulated and agreed to the wishes of the demonstrators. Despite several (much smaller) demonstrations and prayer vigils by supporters, Ahok received a two-year prison sentence (Jones, 2017).

Appalled by the growth of religious intolerance in Indonesian society, some young activists backed by wealthy businessman Jeffrie Geovanie formed the Indonesian Solidarity Party or PSI. First registered in 2016, the PSI proclaimed itself to be a new style of party. Rather than stressing its nationalist or religious credentials, PSI represented itself as an advocate for pluralism, women's rights, and the rights of young people. Underscoring its inclusive character, the party chose as its leader Grace Natalie, a millennial, Chinese Indonesian, Christian woman known as a television presenter. Although the party avoids describing itself as liberal, its platform of defending minorities,

secularism, individual rights, and pluralism makes it the closest thing Indonesia has had to a liberal party, at least since the demise of the old PSI.

The PSI relies, to an unusual degree in the Indonesian context, on sophisticated polling, conducted in this case by the firm owned by one of the party's founders, political scientist Saiful Mujani. Its strategists were aware of the limited appeal of the party platform outside some key big city demographics, and therefore concentrated its advertising, largely via television and social media, on an 'emerging constituency of young, educated, middle class voters' (Savirani et al., 2021, 117). In the 2019 election, PSI won seats in district parliaments in Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, and Malang, but at the national level only gained 1.89 per cent of the vote, falling short of the 4 per cent threshold required to take up seats in the national parliament. While it is easy to portray the PSI as a plaything of oligarchs that has already been forced to compromise its ideals to participate in the transactional realities of Indonesian politics, it does represent a fresh chapter in liberal politics and has helped to carve out new ideological space in public discourse. It has significant potential to expand its urban support base but seems unlikely to establish a foothold outside the cities. As Savirani et al. (2021, 131) put it, 'a strategy of marketing at the level of discourse is no substitute for organising citizens'.

A final episode that illustrates the precarious position of Indonesian liberals followed Jokowi's decision to ban Hizbut Thahir Indonesia, a large and influential group that advocated peaceful struggle for a caliphate in Indonesia. To enable this, Jokowi issued a presidential decree amending the Mass Organisations Law (Perppu 2/2017) giving the government extraordinary powers to ban any organisations deemed to threaten national unity or Pancasila. This move, which Mietzner (2018) has described as 'fighting illiberalism with illiberalism', drew protests from some human rights organisations and the Legal Aid Foundation because it threatened to impose restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and thought.

But liberal opposition to the Presidential Decree was far from unanimous. Indeed, the dissenting voices were frail in comparison to those, including PSI (Mudhoffir, 2018), who were prepared to go along with the ban on HTI and the introduction of the draconian law because it was regarded as a blow to the Islamist forces in Indonesian politics, indicating again an ambivalence among Indonesian liberals about whose rights matter. For all their successes in improving democratic processes and protecting rights and freedoms, they have, historically, been quite prepared to turn a blind eye to the abuses perpetrated against their adversaries.

Conclusion: Patterns in Indonesian Liberalism

This article has attempted to show that while collectivist ideologies have dominated in most historical periods, liberalism has always been present – sometimes visible, sometimes less so. If we focus on the positions taken in political debates in post-independence Indonesia, clear patterns do emerge.

First, liberalism in Indonesia has almost always been a counter-narrative, reacting to and sometimes shaped by collectivist, populist, religious, or class-based ideologies. This was true of Hatta and Yamin's advocacy of political rights in the constitutional debates of 1945, as it was of Sjahrir's defence of minority rights in *Our Struggle*, written in opposition to the rising tide of revolutionary nationalism of his time. The invocation of Locke

and Jefferson in defence of individual rights and parliamentary democracy by party leaders in the mid-1950s occurred in the shadow of Sukarno's populist authoritarianism, while the signatories of the Cultural Manifesto saw themselves as lonely holdouts against the rising influence of the PKI. Even when liberals thought they had won in 1965, many soon found themselves either consigned to technocratic roles or standing on the political sidelines calling out Soeharto's latest human rights abuses or his distortion of Pancasila ideology. Liberals did have real political influence for a brief period after the fall of Soeharto, but, as has been described in this article, resurgent authoritarianism and Islamist conservatism have given liberal initiatives such as JIL, the Freedom Institute, and PSI an insurgent character.

A second important pattern has been the broadening of the domestic constituency for liberal ideas. Sjahrir addressed himself primarily to the tiny, educated elite in Indonesia and the US-dominated international community. His PSI played an outsized role in the first years of independence, but its lack of popular backing was revealed when it only gained 2 per cent of the national vote in the general elections of 1955. Sukarno's arbitrary rule prompted many disparate groups to rally around the issues of constitutionalism and the rule of law in the mid-1960s, and a variety of Cold War liberalism inspired by modernisation theory certainly appealed to many elements of the coalition that brought Soeharto's New Order to power. But it was not until the 1980s that a significant middle class had emerged, creating a much-expanded constituency for liberal ideas around legal regularity and guarantees of personal rights and freedoms. The shift in government policy in the 1980s towards more deregulated markets created the conditions for what Mallarangeng (2002) called the emergence of a 'liberal epistemic community', but this was more focused on economic issues than on achieving political goals. As Habibie discovered in 1998, the New Order's combination of free-market economic policies and political repression had created a huge backlog of unmet demands for political liberalisation by Indonesia's middle classes. It is notable that opinion polling between 1999 and 2014 showed overwhelming support for the statement that 'Democracy is the best form of government for Indonesia' (Mujani et al., 2018, 10). This said, there is also evidence of a growing appetite for authoritarianism. A survey on democratic regression in late 2019 revealed a growing gap in perception between political elites who privilege 'procedural and representative aspects of democratic government' and ordinary citizens who view 'democracy as a means of delivering social and economic benefits' (Aspinall et al., 2019, 514). With autocratisation sweeping across Asia and the Middle East, the study suggests, '[t]he substantive interpretation of democracy held by many Indonesians points towards a potential constituency for an authoritarian or illiberal leader (or movement) that promises greater economic benefits' (Aspinall et al., 2019, 514).

Paralleling this growth has been what could be called a vernacularisation of liberalism. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Indonesian liberals drew their inspiration from classical liberal heroes from Europe and the US. Cold War liberalism continued to be important in the 1960s, with a range of foreign funding agencies pouring money into universities and foundations to encourage US-style modernisation. But, as we have indicated, there were also home-grown networks, consisting especially of people who had been associated with the PSI and the liberal wing of Masjumi, who played a vital role in keeping liberalism alive, especially in the New Order years. Sympathetic newspapers, magazines, NGOs, foundations, and study groups, often with both foreign and Indonesian funding, acted as

incubators for young liberal journalists and intellectuals who went on to build their own communities of interest and organisations. In addition to the examples discussed above, there are growing numbers of fiction writers and intellectuals who embody and sustain the vernacular liberal tradition in Indonesia. As noted, liberals have increasingly tended to frame their ideas with reference to Indonesian traditions, from Pancasila to *Islam Nusantara*.

A final observation from this survey that links to the Introduction to this Special Issue is that liberalism in Indonesia is contingent. There are very few liberals who have been consistently liberal. In this sense they are little different from liberals in other Southeast Asian countries who have sided with authoritarian statism when their interests have been threatened. This speaks volumes about the liberals' actual power base. Although they might exert influence in certain areas of state policy, Indonesian liberals do not have mass-based organisational support or the capacity to translate their visions into political power. While two post-New Order presidents (Habibie and Abdurrahman Wahid) implemented a series of democratic reforms along liberal lines, the lack of a self-confident liberal constituency has seen these gains eroded in the face of resurgent authoritarian statism and religious intolerance.

Notes

1 Evi Sutrisno (2015) details the active support of some liberals, including Todung Mulya Lubis, for the International People's Tribunal for Crimes against Humanity in Indonesia in 1965 and 1966.
2 According to Sjahrir, for instance, 'Our socialism is for the greater good of humanity, not merely for one group, the proletariat, the workers' (1982, 79).
3 This development paralleled German revisionism exemplified by Bernstein (whom Sjahrir followed), but also, more importantly, Russian 'Legal Marxism' represented by Pyotr Struve, Sergei Bulgakov, Mikhail Tugan-Baranovsky, and others. In the 1890s, Legal Marxists argued that the development of capitalism in Russia was necessary and beneficial as it would modernise the Russian economy (Howard & King, 1989). These Legal Marxists, in the words of one chronicler of the Russian Revolution, 'often find in their Marxism a roundabout way to be liberals, their focus shifting from workers' concerns to the necessity of the capitalist "modernisation" that Russia's cowardly bourgeoisie cannot bring forth' (Miéville, 2017, 14).
4 As Robison observed (1986, 39), 'The softening of the approach to private capital also partly reflected the growing connections between political parties and powerful families with business interests, as well as the temporary ascendancy of political planners holding a "gradualist" approach to the question of economic development'.

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